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THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

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MORAL "CONTROLS" IN THE NURSERY AND THE KINDERGARTEN

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I have borrowed the word "controls" from Dr. W. C. Bagley's paper on "Controls of Conduct in the Schoolroom," published in the *Elementary School Teacher*, March, 1908. I like the word, because it implies many opportunities for learning wisdom both in the training of ourselves, and of our children. A consideration of the necessary elements of time, of circumstance, and of repetition, in a little child's ever-growing adjustments of himself to the requirements of nature and of society will make us grateful for Richter's suggestion: "You need not give any *edicta perpetua*, but your law-giving power can each day issue new decretals, and new pastoral letters."¹

Because the nursery is the baby's first home, playground, school, social center, church, and sometimes the battle-ground where important questions are settled for better, for worse, we find there the experiences which are the raw material out of which his ideals of conduct will be woven. Slowly, very slowly, are the threads singled out of his small daily behaviors; yet, seen or unseen, the work is being done, and the child is himself the chief workman.

Our first and best aid can be given by a careful and frequent taking-account-of-stock of our children's physical ma-

¹ Jean Paul Richter, *Levana*, chap. vi.

chinery; for that, we are to hold ourselves largely responsible. If there is neglect, waste, or friction here, there will be explosions more or less serious all along the line. Fortunately, science comes to our aid here, and our personally conducted efforts, while somewhat experimental, generally are reasonably successful with normally born children. Henry Ward Beecher is reported to have said that if he "could be born well the first time, he would willingly take his chances of a second birth." But just as the body must be nourished, so must the inner nature of the child have its sustenance. Moral health and goodness do not come, nor will they stay of their own momentum. Only through the right and the constant use of the means of growth will there be an increase of power. The nutrition, air, exercise, rest, etc., which the body needs, all have their moral analogues. The nursery needs its moral and ethical "airs" temperatures; its pabulum of happy play, song and story, its laws of constraint as well as its laws of freedom. And even then, with the right knowledge, the right desire, there is the everlasting problem of its right application to each child in the home and school; for after all, the "meaning of life is in the individual."

The wisdom of the twentieth century shows us no better place to begin this sort of training than did Plato, when he said: "The best way to train the young, is to train yourself at the same time; not to admonish them, but to be always carrying out your principles in your own practice."² There can be no shilly-shallying here, without the loss of an enormous amount of "perfectly good" energy on the part of parents, teachers, and children. The child is a "behaving organism," which absorbs its stimuli far more from the lives of the people about him, than from their words. The child who sees father and mother living out true ideals of justice, temperance, industry, and religion (I mean by the latter the soul's relationship to God and man) will not lack for inspiration. "Inspiration" says Emerson, "is like yeast. 'Tis no matter in which of half a dozen ways you procure the infection, you can apply one or the other equally well to your purpose. And every earnest workman, of whatever sort, knows

² Jowett, *Plato's Laws*, Book V.

some favorable conditions for his task." Should the question be asked, "How can I attain this power?" the answer might be that given by the southern revivalist, who, when asked by some woman how she could "get religion," replied, "Act like you had it!"

Having gotten oneself somewhat in hand (we need not wait to be perfect), one naturally asks when and where and how the more definite work with the children should begin. Shall we find that moral growth has its nascent periods, as do instincts and impulses, muscles and cells? Are there some virtues which are more needed in childhood than at any other time, and which, because of the general plasticity of mind and spirit, can be better fostered at this time? Dr. Adler takes up these and similar problems, and his answers are definite and rational. He feels, as do most sane people, that the cradle is the place to begin; that regularity in the child's life, while not in itself morality, is conducive to moral development, because it sets a check on mere impulse, which like all good things is capable of abuse. He feels that a child of eighteen months can be taught obedience to its parents, and that this is necessary, for without the knowledge that there is a higher will than his own, no one can ever become a truly moral person.³

Froebel takes as his starting-point, the development in the child of what (for want of a better name) I like to call *passive courage*. It is really the beginning of lessons in endurance or fortitude, but these words appear a bit formal and rather severe when applied to a baby. He states the idea somewhat in this way. In the child's very first crying there is no self-will; it is an expression of unrest. The wilful and obstinate element comes into it, when the attendant is negligent or indolent in regard to a child's real discomfort. This may be fanciful, it may be real. Therefore the mother or attendant must be able to discriminate. Finding that all has been done that can be done, she may leave the little one to "find himself;" for if the persistent crying has brought attention and sympathy when not needed, the child soon learns to use his energy to govern those about him, rather than

³ See Felix Adler, *Moral Instruction of Infancy*, chap v.

to use it to control himself.⁴ A long experience with children in the nursery and out of it convinces me that the child who has learned something of this element of submission, who can in some degree take things as they are, who early learns to take his place as a member of the family rather than the part of a young monopolist, has made no small headway in his moral controls. But our rational and effectual requirements should be steady and inexorable. Here again Froebel points out a course so simple and so effective, so truly in harmony with that side of child nature which, instead of being hostile to law, shows that he has, at least, an innate respect for custom, (and is not this one of the child's early spellings of "morals" and "ethics?") :

All true education [says Froebel] should at every moment be simultaneously double-sided; giving and taking, prescriptive and following, active and passive. . . . Between education and pupil, between request and obedience, there should rule an invisible third something, to which educator and pupil are equally subject. This third something is the right, the best, necessarily conditioned and expressed without arbitrariness in the circumstances.⁵

Many a heartache comes to many parents because they have not been able to call forth habits of response, trust, and confidence from their children. Honest self-examination would show that the parents do not deserve it; they have not earned it, because of their thoughtless, inconsistent, and ignorant methods of procedure. To illustrate this, let me give an incident used by the author of *Parents and Pedagogues*:

"Roger, come right back here this minute! Snake down there!" called out a young mother, neighbor of mine, yesterday. I naturally looked to see what danger my little friend Roger was getting into. The two-year-old adventurer was hesitating before his mother called him; but at this lie I was revengefully glad to see him start forward with neck outstretched, "Snake! snake! want see snake!" "If I have to come down there, I shall whip you," came from the mother. But the child continued peering round after the snake, and the mother came down. She snatched him up in her arms and kissed him rapturously. "Why don't you come when mamma calls, you darling little idiot?" Two lies in one lesson for this child's first course in mendacity!⁶

⁴ See Froebel (Hailman's trans.) *Education of Man*, pp. 22, 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶ Wilson, *Pedagogues and Parents*, p. 273, H. Holt & Co.

We need make no comment, except this: How often we have seen like inconsistencies and weaknesses!

Referring again to the question of nascent periods of child-like virtues, one can hardly fail to notice a child's natural attitude of respect for things that are true and good and lovely. Is this not the heart of reverence? Will life be worth very much to anyone without this spirit? Is it a noticeable trait in the child of today? Lecky says in his *History of European Morals*: "Of all the forms of moral goodness, a reverential spirit is that to which the epithet 'beautiful,' must be most emphatically applied. Yet the habits of advancing civilization are, if I mistake not, inimical to it." Because some good men and women have come to feel that the idea of it is so wound about with outward forms and conventionalities, rather than the living pulsating one, which would keep us in the state of humility in which alone we may acquire knowledge and wisdom, they seem to think it has no place in the education of our children any longer. I believe that this, like other virtues, can only be taught children in the concrete, and as it is too fine a thing for a child to miss, he should be much in the presence of people whom he cannot fail to love and respect, and his work, too, should be with objects which have for him a content that he can value and respect.

But, however good may be the habits which the child has acquired more or less unconsciously, something more is needed. The time comes when these habits must be made his own, through choice, as well as through use. His own personal feeling for the right must influence the habitual action.

Now comes the time when what we might call the vicarious element in the mother's teaching begins to fade into the background. Little by little she takes her hand from the helm, and lets baby use his own little steering oar. He bumps into rocks of various kinds—capsizes, perhaps, but the mother knows just how deep the water is, and that the child is not beyond his depth. "Look ahead," says Froebel's "Falling, falling" play. "Use your eyes and hands carefully and skilfully." "You can do it." "Try again!" And what courage it gives to be allowed to try again, and to feel that someone has faith in you in spite of your blun-

ders! We sometimes behave as if we expected a child to acquire his little "controls" immediately, rather than mediately. Someone (?) has said that Nature is a thorough believer in the instalment plan in relation to the individual; that it would be an injustice to the poor and weak were she to require cash payments in full for anything!

As the child grows toward adolescence, he may begin to exercise himself in moral gymnastics, somewhat as Mr. James has suggested in his chapter on "Habit," but this can hardly be expected during the years we are considering. The daily "stents" in cleanliness, order, obedience, the performance of little duties, etc., have to be set by parent and teacher, who stand to the child as embodiments of public opinion. Yet the growth and development of the child's selfhood should not lessen the mother's continued training of herself. His self-centeredness, his irregularly bold self-assertiveness, need to be balanced. This is generally done more effectively in the society of other children than in the family group alone, especially if the children are in the care of someone who has a true perspective of child-life. Haweis says: "there is one thing more important than knowing self, it is governing self; one thing more important than using impulse, it is governing impulse;" but this cannot be done until self is known, and in this process of becoming acquainted with self, both child and adult have many surprises. Dr. Bagley's paper, to which I have already referred, comes to our aid again, just here, in its plea for something more to live by than habit alone:

Impulse and emotion [he says] are so closely related as genetically to be indistinguishable; and unless one can oppose an impulse with an idea just as powerfully colored with emotion, the impulse is bound to conquer. . . . It is the *emotionalized idea*, the *ideal*, which will hold the reins of conduct when instinct is battling for control.⁷

Elsewhere in the same article he uses the term "emotionalized prejudice" to express the same thought. I think his argument holds as well for the nursery and kindergarten as for the school.

There must be developed a prejudice highly colored with positive emotional force toward truth . . . impersonal observation, dispassionate

⁷ *Elementary School Teacher*, March, 1908.

judgment, *an emotional attitude against emotion, a prejudice against prejudice.* The early discipline of the family life is the great breeding-ground of these prejudices, because of the positive, profound, emotional factors that operate. (I mean by positive factors, those that operate in favor of the virtues in question.)

Who that has studied Froebel can fail to see this idea running through all of his writings—especially in the *Mother Play Book?* Miss Poulsen once said that this book might be called the “Book of the Evolution of Virtues.” And mightn’t we also call it “A Book of Ways and Means to Call Forth a Child’s Prejudices in Favor of Clear Thinking, Right Feeling, and Noble Doing?”⁸

But just how does Froebel set about this? First, by the mother’s use of the child’s instinctive movements and sense activities, interpreting them not only in the language of the child’s world, but in that of the larger one in which he is already involved, and from which he must evolve—the world of nature, of society, and again into that which is within him, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Much is said now-a-days about leaving the children in freedom to work out their own ideas in gift, occupation, and game, and undoubtedly they should have time for experimentation. But there are certainly ideas *not* yet their own, to which they also have a right because of the pleasure and skill which will come through them. I think that there can be a very definite relation in the very definitely dictated work of the kindergarten materials, and a child’s moral controls. If through such work children reach ends which are thoroughly satisfactory; ends which have lasting value not only while they are in kindergarten but long after; if these ends are such as they would not be likely to “evolve from the depths of their own consciousness,” such a method will not interfere with any self-activity and meantime a great deal has been gained. First, we have strengthened the child’s

⁸ Just here I am interrupted by an anxious psychological-pedagogical parent, who asks: “Have you any right to exercise this sort of hypnotic influence on your child? *Dare* you undertake to ‘emotionalize’ his prejudices?” Yes, my friend, I dare, because I believe that this is one thing parents are here for, and that this is one reason why a child has so long a period of immaturity. A child like an adult needs the sympathetic, wise guidance of those who have learned larger lessons than he himself has learned.

faith in our understanding of his tastes, as well as his belief that we know how to guide him to a new realization of ways and means to ultimate his desires. The child, it is true, may not feel what is often called the logical method of the plan, but he enjoys the facts, the little surprises; he uses his attention and skill in a new way; he becomes interested in details for which there is now a specific need; and that is worth while.

Secondly, through the close union of hearing and doing, habits of attention are set up, and through the co-ordinations of brain and hand, results are reached which again react on the intention, and he really enjoys doing, for the time being, the things *he is told to do*; and that is worth while.

Thirdly, the constant repetitions of language which call into consciousness definite ideas of form, size, number, position, and other elementary attributes which are common to all objects—attributes for which he has an immediate use, make for an understanding of them which he can carry into all his constructive and aesthetic work—and that is worth while.

Fourthly, to the foreign-born child this practical use of language, the *active* use of it, the very definiteness and constant repetition, counts for a very great opportunity, which means much, especially to those who must leave school early.

This special plan or method of work is no experiment; it is as old as the kindergarten itself; and I know it is good and true for, as Mr. Dooley says, “it wurruks,” and I believe that a neglect of it is exactly as bad as too much of it!

All of the exercises of the kindergarten have definite possibilities as well as limitations, and it is in the meeting of just such extremes that the child finds a certain stimulus to his own activity, and in the exercise of it under right conditions he acquires certain controls; he learns to act as of himself. With the development of his individual will there comes the growth of his social will, and a child soon realizes that this is quite as important a factor in his well-being, as that which concerns himself alone.

Hidden away in all of this training, there is something which it is the end of education to develop; and to reach this end, there

must be positive experiences of law and order, as well as experiences of freedom. These, if selected on the basis of a true understanding of child nature—not only on a knowledge of his natural instinctive loves, but with a realization of his possibilities—will be neither foreign nor irksome to him.

The child lives every day in the domain of morals and ethics, though he is unconscious of the fact. He must make good his claim to a "God-heredity" as he does that of his human relationships, through the exercise of that law of which he is at one and the same time the subject and the agent, viz., the law of service, as opposed to the law of self. Froebel understood very well that the child could not reach this ideal without at first running what Mr. Barnes calls "the tentacles of his selfhood," deeply into all that concerns him. In song and story, work and play, he must be given time to establish his own personal "inner connection" with his environment. The whole world appears at first to exist for him alone, and he so uses it. But as he comes in contact with other young persons of his own age who are like-minded, the conflict begins, which, if wisely directed, is to free him from the dominion of so unsatisfactory a master as self alone.

This is the end which Froebel has in view: an organized plan, which with the co-operation of the child will bring him into an ever-growing conscious relation to a larger life of nature, of man, and to a loving and living realization of that Image in which man is created. It is not a difficult thing to develop a feeling of respect for those who stand to the child as the interpreters of this larger outlook, provided they stand sympathetically, rationally, and consistently for it. For a homely example of this: a child will have much less to contend with if a command is given him in a positive yet gentle tone, than in the form of a weak invitation to do the thing which he knows perfectly well ought to be done; especially if it comes bearing the subtle suggestion that mother or teacher have little faith that the idea will be carried out. To illustrate definitely: "Now John, darling, mother has waited for you a long time, won't you *please* [rising inflection] put on your shoes?" (ditto). Compared with the father's strong, fearless—"John, stop fooling and put on your

shoes at once!" The latter is far more effective, for it carries with it an assurance of faith that the order will be executed.

Another important thing for parent and pedagogue to bear in mind is the tendency of the child to hold to the thing he is doing. This has much to do with his response or his indifference to the request or command. A great deal has been wisely said in regard to the evil of breaking into a child's activities when they are under full headway, and switching his interest to other tracks. If the work has been wisely planned—if too much time hasn't been wasted on non-essentials, the probability is that when the time for a change of play or work has come for the majority of the children, the individual child who has a timely warning given can easily adjust himself to it in a perfectly psychological fashion. Here as elsewhere the adult example is stronger than words. The father who lingers to finish the newspaper column, or the mother who stops to cut out the second sleeve of Mary's dress, after the luncheon bell has rung, not only preaches an effective sermon against the law and habit of punctuality to the children, but also to the cook and other members of the household.

The good of the social whole must act as a check at times in individual interests. And we come back again and again to the fundamental law—not of the "greatest good to the greatest number" but to that larger thing, the "greatest good of the whole," and that again leads to the daily practice of the law of use, which means the greatest thing on earth put into living concrete forms. This idea is essentially as simple as it is true and strong.

This law of use [says a recent writer,] is essentially different from the theory which declares the end of life and man's existence to be the glory of God, in the sense of a selfish delight of an arbitrary and powerful Being in experiencing the abject subjection and servitude of inferior creatures. God's glory has no higher or nobler manifestation than in the uses of the universe—in the mutual service of creature to creature. It is in the interchange of human uses that man finds at once the most intense and the highest happiness.⁸

⁸ Rev. Frank Sewall, *The New Ethics*, G. P. Putnam's Sons.

"Billions of years," may alter our ideas of Christ, but they cannot alter the fact that now, to us, and to our children, the story of his life of service to all with whom he came in contact will endure, provided we practice it; for "there is no lost good." It is to this end that we would develop "moral controls" in our children's daily lives, first through the external vicarious control, till in due time the child shall "be predisposed to the higher direct obedience to law itself, of which obedience to the mother is the first stage."¹⁰

¹⁰ Emilie Poulssen, *Love and Law in Child Training*, p. 147.